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SUBJECT: EUROPEAN COMMISSION DISCUSSES SOUTHEAST ASIA ISSUES

Classified By: A/Political Chief Vincent Carver for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: According to our contacts in the European Commission (EC), the EC's top priorities on Burma are to keep attention and pressure focused on the regime and to continue to press ASEAN for meaningful engagement. In the Philippines, the EU is considering options for providing technical assistance to the Qvernment on extrajudicial killings and continues to watch for progress on the peace process in Mindanao. The EC has abandoned its plans for an election monitoring mission in Thailand, and is exploring ways to support judicial reform and progress on rule of law issues in southern Thailand. END SUMMARY.

Burma

12. (C/NF) We discussed a range of issues with Commission SE Asia Unit Head Seamus Gillespie and Andreas List, Daniele Dal Molin, and Thomas Gnocchi, EC Principal Administrators for Burma, the Philippines and Thailand, respectively (please protect). EC officials said that the EU's top priorities on Burma are to keep attention focused on the Burmese regime and to maintain pressure on the ASEAN members and other regional actors. The danger, said List, is that in five years, the international community will simply refer to this period as the "unrest of 2007," much as we currently refer to the events of 1988 without having seized any opportunities. List expressed the view, shared by some of our Council Secretariat contacts, that while sanctions were important, it will be necessary to devise a longer-term plan that takes advantage of the level of international attention generated by the regime's crackdown. The EU is currently considering how to move forward constructively, specifically in terms of leveraging upcoming summit meetings with ASEAN, China, and India. Gillespie noted that some member states would be hesitant to take more strict measures involving Burma's regional neighbors, such as targeting international banking links, but this could be the only meaningful way of exerting real pressure on the regime.

13. (C/NF) After EU Ministers issued October GAERC conclusions that some officials and commentators viewed as somewhat weak, member states are reportedly beginning to recognize the incoherence of EU initiatives that range from sanctions and disengagement to visits and proposed envoys. The Gambari and UN tracks seem to be the most effective options in the near term, according to EC interlocutors, and the EC would welcome U.S. views on how to support UN envoy Gambari's engagement and keep the UN process on track.

Philippines

14. (C) Gillespie and Dal Molin explained that the EU is currently examining ways to provide support to assist the Philippines in dealing with the problem of unlawful killings.

Member states have reacted favorably to a recent joint EC-Council report outlining potential technical assistance options in areas of investigation, prosecution, witness protection, judges, and civil and human rights organizations.

Concern remains, however, that any such assistance would provide only limited benefit without progress being made on what Gillespie described as "endemic structural problems." An EU needs assessment team that visited the Philippines earlier this year cited lack of coordination and shifting accountability among law enforcement, absence of solid forensic evidence procedures, weak witness protection, and a general malaise among civil society as hurdles in the way of sustainable progress. Recognizing these issues affect the most sensitive issues of national sovereignty, Gillespie said that the EU is trying to devise a way to engage delicately with the government to deal with these structural weaknesses to ensure that any more specific technical assistance has a meaningful and sustainable impact. EC officials expressed a desire to continue cooperation with the U.S. on this issue and would be open to advice on how to further engage the local authorities as they launch their programs.

15. (SBU) Briefly turning to Mindanao, Dal Molin noted that the EU continues to follow the peace process with interest, and has pledged 12 million Euros to the international trust fund. Member states would be willing to step up their assistance when they see clear progress toward a peace agreement.

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Thailand

16. (C) Gillespie said that the EC was concerned that the current challenges in Thailand could be enhanced during the election season, and remained worried that the rise in nationalist sentiment following the coup could prove to be a long-term trend. Officials noted that the EU abandoned its efforts to send an election monitoring mission to Thailand after the GOT refused to sign an MOU for the mission. Gillespie and Gnocchi said that the situation was unfortunately blown out of proportion, and the idea was conceived to provide validation that the country was back on track in the probable case of a fair election. Gillespie added that the Commission was treading a fine line with member states who were divided on the EU's level of involvement, with many of them opposed to treating Thailand in the same way as Laos or Cambodia, for instance.

17. (C) The Commission has also been engaging with Thai authorities on security programs for southern Thailand. Initial contacts with the Ministries of Justice and Education as well as with the Royal Thai Police were positive, said Gnocchi, but in a move the EC sees as an attempt to delay progress, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has insisted that future communication from the EU be channeled through the MFA. Recognizing that the Thai government was unenthusiastic about outside actors in the south, the EC thus shifted its focus to non-state actors and is working on small programs with NGOs and academic institutions to support judicial reform and informed debate on the future of southern Thailand. They are examining options to do further training in Bangkok as well as considering working with other local partners.

ASEAN and other actors

¶18. (C) Gillespie noted that Commission also preparing for the EU's November 22 summit with ASEAN. The two organizations are currently working on the joint action plan language which will focus on trade, cultural cooperation, and immigration. The Burma issue remains the wild card for the summit, but viewed positively, Burmese attendance could provide an opportunity for the EU to exert collective pressure on the regime. Gillespie added that the EU is watching the development of the ASEAN charter with interest. The EC perceives the fate of the charter as a litmus test for the integration project and fears that if momentum on the common market is not seized now, the project will fail.

¶19. (SBU) Rounding out the discussion, the EC officials also briefly mentioned that they are interested in Indonesia's future prospects, particularly within ASEAN and the region more broadly. Given the EU's involvement in Aceh, they also monitor the peace process closely and are somewhat concerned, said List, about the government's weakness and lack of economic incentives as potentially damaging the sustainability of peace. He added, however that EC is looking for ways to emphasize Indonesia as a model for inter-religious and multi-cultural dialogue and cooperation in Europe and beyond.

Comment

¶10. (C/NF) The EU's focus SE on Asia historically has been limited, but the Asian financial crisis, tsunami, and political crises in the region since 2000 have spurred increased involvement and attention among EU members. Commission officials also credit U.S. and Australian pressure to become more engaged in the region with this recent uptick in activity and interest. Because EU member states have relatively minimal representation in the region, much of the initiative for projects falls to the Commission, and the EC in turn many times looks for our expertise and cooperation on common challenges and goals. We see opportunities to provide input to help shape the EC's own agenda in the upcoming months, particularly on a coordinated course of action on Burma and targeted technical assistance in the Philippines.

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